

**Community Children's Nursing Service (CCNS)**

**Nutrition and Dietetics**

East London Foundation Trust

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**Tell us what you think** (We would appreciate and welcome your feedback to continually improve our services.

Your responses will be kept confidential).

**References:**

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg128>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/autism-eating>

<https://www.arfidawarenessuk.org>

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Information for Parents and Carers

**Eating and Drinking with Autism**



Community Children's Nursing Service (CCNS)

**Nutrition and Dietetics**

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### Cognitive

Children with autism process information differently and usually have the need for 'sameness'. This can impact their food preferences and habits, such as:

- Prefer sticking to the same routine
- Always want the exact same utensil/plate
- Want food presented in a specific way (e.g. slightly burnt or a specific shape)
- Children often prefer foods that are similar:
  - Appearance, such as beige carbohydrates, like bread, pasta, crisps.
  - Texture/consistency, such as smooth yoghurt without any "bits" or chocolate buttons
- Whole food groups are frequently avoided, usually meat, fruit, and/or vegetables.



### Food Neophobia

Food refusal often increases between the ages of 18 and 24 months.

Neophobia, (the fear of the unfamiliar) is a common stage in children's development of food acceptance in which they reject foods if they haven't already seen others eat them.

Neophobia typically disappears with:

- age
- brain development
- seeing others eating the food (role modelling)

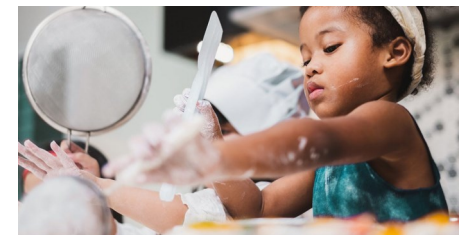
Neophobia persists for a lot longer in autistic individuals due to their social and cognitive difficulties. .



### What to Avoid?

- Avoid always offering the same meals; instead, provide them options that fall within their accepted range. Children can develop taste boredom then stop eating.
- Avoid withholding preferred foods.
- Avoid provoking or pressuring your child into eating.
- Avoid providing an incentive for eating a particular item (example: giving pudding if they eat their vegetables).
- Avoid disguising or hiding food; doing so may cause your child to lose interest in the familiar meal or make them distrustful of it.
- Avoid having prolonged periods of not offering food and drink in the hope that they will eat a food that you are offering because they must be hungry.

It's vital to encourage your child to touch and investigate foods, even food off your plate, so try not to be too strict about good table manners. Many parents do not find this desirable, but it may encourage your child to try a new dish.





## Suggestions:

In order to maintain development and energy in your child, it's key to let them consume the foods they enjoy.

Try keep mealtimes fun/playful

Let them to use the plate they prefer

Keep pressure and anxiety low by allowing them to eat on their own terms . E.g. if the smells of various foods prevent them from eating at the table with the family, let them eat separately

If your child asks to, let them try something from your plate

Let your child choose their meal from 2 or 3 options

Rotate all the meals they consume on a regular basis to maintain their diet as varied as possible (children can quickly forget they like something)

If they allow, serve unfamiliar food on a separate plate

Follow a regular feeding schedule, offering food at breakfast, lunch, supper, and preferable when they are indicating a desire to eat. Many children thrive when given structure and regularity.

Let your child choose how much they eat without pressure/encouragement

Try choose items that are very similar to the ones they already consume and serve them alongside their favourites. If your child enjoys crunchy meals, give them those; if they prefer bland or pureed foods, give them

Serve your child's food in a bowl rather than a package. This will allow them to see what they are eating and may help them become less brand-focussed

Provide a vitamin supplement that they will take (if unsure ask healthcare professional).

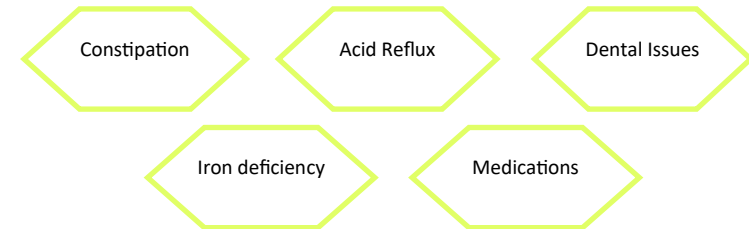
Include your child in the process of preparing food. Serve meals on novelty plates or bowls if they enjoy a certain dinosaur, animal, or character

Encourage your child to play with and touch food both during and outside of meals

## Anxiety, Disgust and Contamination

Individuals with Autism frequently experience anxiety before, during, and after meals. Including worries about whether the food will be "acceptable," becoming sick, and choking. Meal settings away from home can also cause distress. Feelings of disgust and contamination are also frequent.

**Other factors:** Many autistic children don't seem to be able to identify or comprehend when they are hungry. The following symptoms can all have an impact on appetite, that affect eating and hunger in children



It is important to resolve these proactively. If unsure, please discuss with your health professional

## How to help?

The best technique to assist your child is to consider what they are capable of. This can help you understand how your child should eat. To identify any patterns in their eating and drinking, you might want to keep a diary. All of us eat best when we are relaxed and offered food that we like to eat, it is the same for your child.

Do they eat better in certain circumstances?

If so, please describe what? When? How?

Do they eat from a certain plate?

Do they have food presented in a certain way?

Do they eat certain foods?

Do they have a strict routine with meal times?

